



Viewpoint: Western Massachusetts' economic development is blossoming

Union Station 2012.jpg

The exterior of Union Station is seen on Frank Murray Street in downtown Springfield. *(Mark M. Murray / The Republican file)*

The Republican By **The Republican**

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By **MARTY JONES**

MassDevelopment, the Commonwealth's real-estate and finance authority, has seen a recent explosion in activity in the Pioneer Valley. Specifically, recent developments in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Westfield will ready the region for a colorful autumn.

MassDevelopment bought the former federal courthouse in Springfield in 2009 and has since revitalized and rebranded it as 1550 Main. Five years ago, city, state, federal, and business leaders worried the building would be mothballed; today, occupancy at 1550 Main exceeds 92 percent.

Alekman & DiTusa, a Springfield law firm, finalized a lease in early September for more than 4,000 square feet. Its neighbors at 1550 Main include **Baystate Health**, the Springfield School Department, Macmillan and Son, and Kelly Services. Art exhibits enliven the interior atrium and summer concerts entertain lunchtime users of the plaza.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren and her Springfield staff recently joined the 1550 Main family and discovered that security guard Ken Konopka's father was killed in World War II, but never received his Purple Heart. The staff secured the posthumous Purple Heart for the late Mr. Konopka and presented it to Ken, a Ludlow resident, at a 1550 Main ceremony.

1550 Main shows results; Union Station shows the sprouts of rehabilitation. Earlier this year, MassDevelopment provided \$467,400 in grants from the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund to assess and clean up contamination at a former parking garage across from the Station, laying the groundwork for surface parking and bus bays to support the new **Union Station Intermodal Transportation Center**.

The latest grant raised the Agency's total commitment to Union Station to \$2.1 million. Unfortunately, the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund is fully committed and unable to fund new requests, a situation we hope will be resolved by the Legislature soon to continue to help worthy projects like this one.

Holyoke received a boost with the spring opening of the Massachusetts High Performance Computing Center.

Officials this fall are focusing on smart-growth opportunities in this Gateway City. MassDevelopment's real estate department is working with Holyoke leaders to explore strategies for downtown redevelopment, an effort that grew from collaborating with the Holyoke Housing Authority to examine options for the redevelopment of Lyman Terrace.

After studying opportunities for housing preservation and renovation and identifying public improvements that will enhance the safety and public amenities in the neighborhood, the Holyoke Housing Authority issued a request for proposals for a partner to redevelop Lyman Terrace. The response so far appears promising. Even prior to selecting a developer, MassDevelopment continues to work with the City of Holyoke to identify other key redevelopment opportunities within the downtown along with the resources needed to spark further revitalization.

Economic development requires working the residential as well as the commercial sides of development. Here, too, the region seems to be in good shape. MassDevelopment has seen more people drawn to downtown living in the Pioneer Valley. At Village Hill Northampton, a New Urbanist community on the site of the former Northampton State Hospital, local builder Jonathan Wright is embarking on a multifamily development in the neighborhood's **Ford Crossing** residential area. Peco Homes, a West Springfield developer, has sold its first 10 lots in the Westview neighborhood.

These new projects build on Village Hill Northampton's past successes: all six single-family lots in Ford Crossing's Beechwood development have sold, and the community's first commercial building on the north campus is scheduled to open next month. Plans are in the works to add housing in a variety of types to meet demand, which should in turn continue the virtuous cycle of residential and commercial development at Village Hill Northampton.

MassDevelopment's finance programs have also boosted housing and industry in the Pioneer Valley. The Agency partnered with community banks – Clinton Savings Bank, Hampden Bank, and Savings Institute Bank and Trust Company of Connecticut – to finance construction of Armbrook Village, the 122-unit senior living community in Westfield.

The Agency has also stepped up its support of the Massachusetts manufacturing industry, which boasts a storied tradition of precision machining in the Pioneer Valley. Both the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County and Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School received grants through MassDevelopment's AMP it up! campaign, designed to promote careers in advanced manufacturing. Thanks to tours at companies like Chicopee's Hoppe Technologies and programs for students in Ware and Palmer, a whole new generation can see the high-tech, skilled opportunities in manufacturing.

Pioneer Valley communities are diverse: bucolic, liberal, urban, and working-class. The recent surge in regional economic development has lifted different municipal types. Each, though, does have something in common. One of Springfield's favorite and fantastical sons has a quote that could apply to economic development rather than the Lorax: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." The Pioneer Valley is fortunate to have a cadre of thoughtful, active civic and governmental leaders who invest their time and talents in their communities and their futures. Their work is multiplied by private sector commitment to the Pioneer Valley: builders, developers, and employers creating economic opportunity in the area. All of us will need to continue to work together to keep up this momentum. As Dr. Seuss so wisely put it, "It's not about what it is, it's about what it

can become.”

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